

## POSTMODERNISM AND ITS RELEVANCE TO AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relevance of postmodernism to development in Africa. Data collected from secondary sources shows that, postmodernism as a critique of modernism is associated with knowledge which has become commoditised. Given the computerisation of society and the dominance of mass media, the true seat of power is where knowledge is located. The benefits to African countries are therefore minimal given the decline of state sovereignty in the postmodern world. African states therefore have to strengthen Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in order to participate effectively in E-commerce. Also, African leaders have to have the political will to strategically position their states to compete favourably in the postmodern world by forming partnerships that can be beneficial rather than detrimental to Africa in the postmodern world.

**KEYWORDS:** Postmodernism, Relevance, Africa, Development.

### INTRODUCTION

The study of politics generally focuses on issues of development and underdevelopment. Several approaches, methodologies and theories have been propounded by scholars to explain the levels of development in both Third World Nations and advanced countries. Western scholarship particularly argues that Third World Countries are not developed because of their failure to imbibe the values of the west and the only way to attain sustainable development is to denounce traditional values and become modern.

On the other hand, third World scholars believe that scholars in the West have not had a dialectical view about the conditions of Third World Countries. They assume also that, the centuries of contacts between the advanced countries and the less developed ones have robbed them the opportunity to develop. This has resulted to shifts towards new approaches to the study of politics both domestic but particularly international politics.

Postmodernism has therefore been one of the most influential and controversial theoretical development in the study of international relations in recent times. It is indeed the latest theory in the study of international relations. Although arguments abound as to what postmodernism is all about, emphasis in this work will be placed on the more positive account of postmodernism's contribution to development.

It is against this background that this paper examines postmodernism and its relevance to development with specific relevance to Africa.

### Conceptualising Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a term usually used to describe a type of intellectual thought that is often considered a critique of (or reaction to) modernism. The term is extremely controversial in that, many scholars, intellectuals and, historians have failed to agree on what it is, and whether it exists. Nevertheless, most agree that post-modern ideas have had a major impact on philosophy, critical theory and culture since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term defies easy definition, but generally comprises the following core ideals:

- (a) A continual scepticism towards the ideas and ideals of modernism, especially the ideas of progress, objectivity, reason, certainty and personal identity and grand narrative in general.
- (b) The assertion that meaning and experience can only be created by the individual and cannot be made objective by an author.
- (c) Acceptance of a mass-media dominated society in which there is no originality but only copies of what has been done before.
- (d) Globalisation, a culturally pluralistic and profoundly interconnected global society lacking any single dominant centre of political power, communication, or intellectual production. Instead, the world is moving towards decentralization in all types of global processes.

It is against the above backdrop that Mclean and Macmillan (2003:429) defines postmodernism as a school of thought which rejects what is called modernism. It is a term used by those who seek to respond to modernism. It is characterised by the ascendancy of science and reason as means for both understanding and explaining the world. Postmodernism explains that, the success of the rational application of science to nature and the progress that ensued in this field, led to a belief that rational and scientific approaches to economics, politics, society and morality would ensure progress in these fields too.

Postmodernist respond to what they assume to be the twin failures of science and reason to deliver progress. Postmodernism therefore denote new artistic, cultural or theoretical perspective which renounces modern discourses and practices.

#### The Rise of Postmodernism as an Intellectual Thought

Although discourses of postmodernism circulated throughout the world in the 1980's the most significant developments of post-modern theory have taken place in France. A series of cultural, theoretical and political events occurred in France which helped give rise to new post-modern theories.

Smart (1992) argues that postmodernism was influenced by the rapid modernisation process in France which followed the Second World War, exciting development in philosophy and social theory during the 1950s and 60s and the dramatic sense of rupture produced by the turbulent events of 1968, in which a student and worker's rebellion brought the country to a standstill, appearing to resurrect French revolutionary traditions. While the political hopes of the day were soon dashed, the apocalyptic impulses of the time were translated into the postmodern theories of a fundamental rupture in history and inauguration of a new era.

Post World War II modernization processes in France produced a sense of rapid change and a feeling that a new society was emerging. France went through a spectacular renewal. A stagnant economy turned into one of the world's most dynamic and successful bringing with it changes in life styles. New social theories therefore emerged to articulate the sense of dynamic change experienced by many in post war France.

In post war France, the intellectual scene had been dominated by Marxism, existentialism and phenomenology as well as attempts to synthesize them. These theories were later in the 1960's superseded by linguistically oriented discourses of structuralism which advanced new concepts of theory and society. Structural analysis focused on the underlying rules which organised phenomenon into a social system, and claimed scientific status for its theories. The new theories led to radical critiques of modern philosophy, attacking its root assumptions. The conclusion was reached that a radically new philosophical practice were needed. Scholars such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein among others developed a critique of modernity which later formed a new intellectual thought called postmodernism.

Postmodern theory, however, is not merely a French phenomenon but has attained international scope. This is because German thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger already began the attack on traditional concepts and modes of philosophy. Also, the American philosophers William James and John Dewey championed a radical pluralism while the English Historians Toynbee and Barra clough and North American social theorists Bell, Etzioni, Drucker and Mills introduced the concept of postmodern age in history and social theory. In fact interest in all facets of the postmodern theory has been most intense in the English speaking world with conferences, journals and publishing lists proliferating in the countries. In particular, the debates over postmodernity have been intense in the United States, England, Canada and Australia.

Thus a diversity of theoretical and political response and strategies has emerged in the postmodern debates. They took on an international scope and resonance by the 1980's and has penetrated every academic field challenging regnant orthodoxies and affirming new postmodern perspective and positions.

#### Theoretical Assumptions of Postmodernism

Postmodernism as an intellectual thought is a critique of modernism. However, there is no general agreement among scholars as to what constitute the major assumptions of the theory. This is based on their assumption that experience is personal and therefore cannot be generalized.

Liotard (1986) accepts postmodernism to be a critique of modernism and argued further that while modernity is a cultural condition characterized by constant changes in the pursuit of progress, post modernity represents the culmination of this process, where constant change has become a status- quo and progress obsolete. This means that changes in the society as argued by modernist have not brought about significant positive progress. He also assumes that master-narratives of progress such as positive science, Marxist and structuralism were defunct as methods of achieving progress. He claims that in the contemporary high tech media society, emergent process of change and transformation are producing a new postmodern society and that, the era of postmodernism constitute a novel stage of history and socio-cultural formation which requires new concepts and theories. Technologies such as computers and media, new forms of knowledge and changes in the socio-economic systems are producing a postmodern social formation.

Postmodernism provides critique of representation and the modern belief that theory mirrors reality. Rather, theories at best provide partial perspective on their objects since all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated. It assumes that modernism has not been able to help mankind hence the need for another approach in explaining reality. There is always more than one perspective and that each perspective represents the world view.

Obikeze (2003:8) argues that postmodernism is a type of economically advanced social order in which the centrally important resources is knowledge. This means that post modernism is associated with heterogeneity, plurality, constant innovation and pragmatic construction of local rules and, perspective agreed upon by participant (Best and Kellner 1991). It also involves the reshaping of activities across the globe with trend towards globalization as well as an increasing tension between integration and separatism as evidenced in the resurgence of ethnic, religious and national identities (Watson 1995, Good and Velody 1998). The above explanation shows that knowledge is the basis for innovation and policy making. That is to say that society is knowledge-driven and knowledge dependent with ever changing high level competences and, expertise necessary for its continued growth and prosperity.

Smart (1992) posits that the postmodern economic sector is dominated by multi-national conglomerates actively extending the frontiers of globalization to the ever increasing advantage of the techno-advanced nations. This has brought about a notable shift in the occupational structure towards scientific, technological and, professional forms of employment, engendering a growing requirement for professional workers, relevant education and training to provide the kind of services which are increasingly demanded. Education and learning have become much more oriented towards the training and inculcation of skills and rather less concerned with what are increasingly denigrated as liberal values and ideals. Postmodernism is therefore essentially a knowledge society characterized by superficiality, surface image with increasing emphasis on performance. It is dominated by media cybernetics models and steering systems, information processing, entertainment and knowledge industries driving steadily towards a generalized computerization of society.

Postmodernism connotes the idea that, knowledge has become commoditised. With computerization of society and the dominance of mass media, knowledge becomes fluid. The true seat of power then is where the knowledge is being controlled. The state becomes less powerful as more agents can wield or control this knowledge.

It is in line with the above argument that Devetak (2006) asserts that postmodernism assumes that knowledge and power are mutually exclusive, meaning that knowledge generates power. That is, states need sovereignty in order to attain results. However, sovereignty is not a fixed concept. Its functions change over time. There are certain interventions such as globalization which have shaped sovereignty of states. The present world is governed by knowledge hence he who has knowledge is powerful. Postmodernism as a theory therefore is concerned with exposing the textual interplay behind power – politics or within power politics.

Marxist scholars believe that, postmodernism is associated with late capitalism and the decline of state institutions. It is a response to contemporary capitalism which is going through an expansionist cycle and producing new commodities, abundance and a more affluent lifestyle. From this perspective, postmodernism can be associated with the new wave of globalization. It is dominated with information and communication technology which has influenced socio-political and economic transaction across national borders. Postmodernism assumes that, the world has become a global village hence knowledge is imperative for economic and political transactions. Businesses are transacted through E-commerce and this has facilitated easy and effective international relations. It means therefore that those who have the knowledge are powerful and hence wield more influence in international transactions.

#### The Relevance of Postmodernism to Development in Africa

If postmodernism is associated with late capitalism occasioned by globalization, then, the benefits to Africa become questionable. Postmodernism assumes that knowledge and power are mutually exclusive but since sovereignty is not fixed and can be influenced by intervening variables such as globalization, then we can argue that African states have lost their sovereignty in the postmodern world. Policy-making and implementation which hitherto used to be under the control of states is now under the control of World Trade Organization (WTO). The most significant effect is that, African states are not represented in the world trade organization hence their interest are not considered and brought to bear on policies that concerns issues of international economic relations.

The postmodern world also encourages capital flight, labour migration and travels. Cross border trade in the postmodern era has raised the Gross Domestic Product of United States, Germany and Japan. The benefits of postmodernism are not evenly shared. Countries such as in Africa which lag behind in the revolution in communication and information technology are not a part of the beneficiary (Usman 2000). The postmodern world represents a new form of neo-colonialism for African countries.

Also, low-skilled workers suffer as safety nets are weakened. Africa has a high level of unskilled workers and this has affected them adversely. Those who are skilled are not quite comfortable and this has given rise to brain drain. In the end advanced capitalist countries gain while Africa and other third world countries are at the losing end.

The postmodern world has benefited those countries that industrialized and most improved their information and communication technology infrastructure while the losers are those that achieved less in these respects.

African countries are experiencing more poverty in the postmodern world than what was obtained before this era. The global wealth that is generated is not shared commonly. This is due to the lack of capacity by Africa countries to compete favourably with advanced countries.

On the whole, the postmodern world has not yielded positive dividends to Africa. Rather, she has remained dependent due to the unequal global economic system

#### CONCLUSION

Postmodernism is a critique of modernism and it posits that knowledge has become commodified and with the computerization of society and the dominance of mass media, the true seat of power is where knowledge is located. African countries therefore do not stand the chance to benefit much in the postmodern world as their sovereignty has eroded. The challenge for Africa therefore, is to try to adjust to face the challenges of postmodernism. African states should participate effectively in e-commerce.

Most importantly, African leaders need the political will to act favourably in the postmodern world. This is because in the midst of these disadvantages, African countries are still bent on forming partnership while the global economic agenda in the postmodern world has shown to be a failure for African countries. African leaders do not appear to have realized this and are providing further opening through new partnerships with the west. There is therefore the need to develop new ties in order that African states can benefit in the postmodern world.

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